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NEWS  
LETTER

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## Reading Sutras as a Spiritual Practice

A talk delivered by Master Sheng-yen at Tibet House in New York City, on November 5, 1994, and edited by Linda Peer and Harry Miller.

*[Shih-fu's talk is preceded by recitation of the Heart Sutra by everyone in English.]*

The Buddhist scriptures are divided into three categories. The vinaya and sila are moral codes and precepts spoken by the Buddha, the shastras are commentaries on the Buddha's teachings by bodhisattvas and great masters, and the sutras are discourses spoken by the Buddha. Together they make up the *Tripitaka*. Each kind of scripture has special benefits. The sutras are particularly concerned with the mind, and their function is the cultivation of samadhi and wisdom. The vinaya helps us to behave in a correct and proper way, so that our actions, speech and thoughts accord with Buddhadharma. Finally, the shastras help us to cultivate our analytical understanding of Buddhadharma.

I can talk to you about a number of topics: sutra reading as practiced in early Buddhism and in the Mahayana tradition; methods of practice in China and Japan based on sutra reading; or the benefits of reading the sutras. What would you find of interest?

You wish to hear something about all of the topics? Fine.

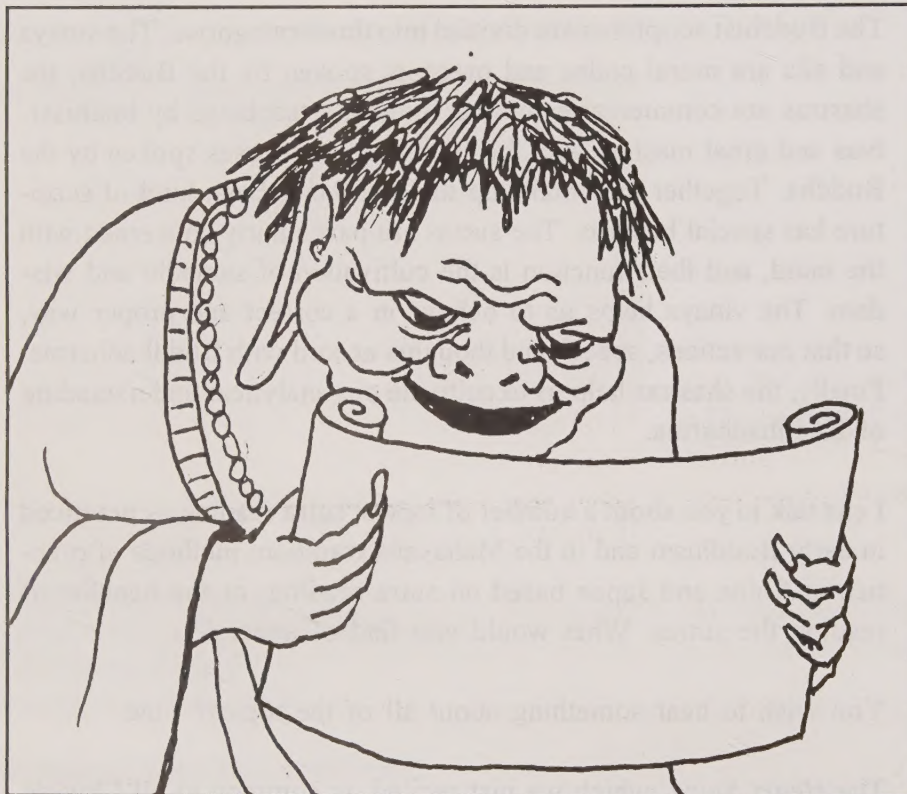
The *Heart Sutra*, which we just recited, is common to all Chinese Buddhist sects, including that of Ch'an, or Zen. Although the teachings and practices of the Ch'an sect, to which I belong, are not based on written words or language, we still recite sutras.

Once a monk asked Master Lin-chi (Jp. Rinzai), the founder of one of the two schools of Ch'an which survive into our time about the usefulness of the sutras. Master Lin-chi said that they are very good for wiping up pus.

A monk saw Ch'an Master Yao-shan reading a scripture and said, "Ch'an is not based on written words and language, so what are you doing reading scriptures?" Master Yao-shan replied, "I only use the scriptures to block my vision."

We can see from these stories that Ch'an does not place strong

emphasis on scriptures. However, Ch'an teaching can be traced back to two sutras, the *Lankavatara Sutra* (*Sutra on the Descent to Sri Lanka*) and the *Diamond Sutra* (*Vajrachchedika-Prajnaparamita-Sutra*). Additionally the *Heart Sutra* is recited every day in Ch'an monastic communities.



The famous Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, was illiterate, but he became enlightened after hearing a phrase from the *Diamond Sutra* recited by a layman who happened to be passing by. Obviously, reciting scriptures can be very useful, and we should do it. We may even be the catalyst for someone else's enlightenment!

Both the Chinese and Japanese traditions teach us to use the scriptures and the recitation of scriptures as a mirror in our practice. Reciting a sutra should cause us to reflect on our actions of body, speech and mind. Do they accord with the sutra

we recite? If not, we should change our actions to pattern directly on the scripture.

There are many methods of sutra reading and recitation. We can read or recite silently. We can "read" a sutra, which means to read aloud, or we can "recite," which means either chanting aloud or reading a sutra over and over again. We can

also write out, or copy, a sutra as a practice. And we can "uphold" a sutra. In "upholding", the practitioner retains the sutra in his or her memory at all times. For instance, you might recite from memory and try to uphold the *Heart Sutra* for days at a time. This is often done silently. Why? Because, for instance, when you go to the washroom it would not be respectful to say the sutra out loud. There is also a practice in which a practitioner who specializes in reciting a particular sutra also explains the sutra to others.

"Recitation through the physical body" is another method. This may sound strange, but it simply means to recite while kneeling.

A method of reciting the sutras while doing prostrations is taught in the *Lotus Sutra*. I will explain how this practice is done later.

Buddhists have probably practiced sutra reading since the beginning of Buddhism. Early Buddhist texts on practice call recitation one of the three major practices.

The 52nd fascicle (or book) of the *Middle Length (Madhyama) Agamas* (the *Agamas* are the earliest collection of Buddha's teachings) encourages practitioners to uphold the sutras, and also to recite the sutras, the vinaya and the shastras, as methods of practice.

The *Ten Pratimoksha* (the *Ten Moral Conducts* or the *Ten Sections*) and the *Martivasaka-Vinaya* (the *Vinaya in Five Sections*) recommend the practice of reciting the vinaya.

The scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism, such as the *Lotus Sutra*, also speak of the merit and function of sutra recitation. The *Lotus Sutra* (the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra*) is one of the most important Mahayana scriptures. It is composed of twenty-eight fascicles, of which eighteen recommend the practice of sutra recitation. The *Lotus Sutra* emphasizes "adorning," or purifying, the six sense organs through scriptural recitation.

The *Savanaprabhasotama Sutra* (the *Golden Illumination Sutra*), another Mahayana sutra, says that reciting and upholding the sutra will enable one to go beyond the ocean of suffering and attain non-regression of Bodhi mind. In other words, the realization the enlightened mind.

In the Pure Land sects, which are part of the Mahayana tradition, two major scriptures are used, the smaller *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra*

(the *Sutra of the Land of Bliss* and the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* (*Sutra of Visualization*)). They are associated with Amitabha Buddha of the

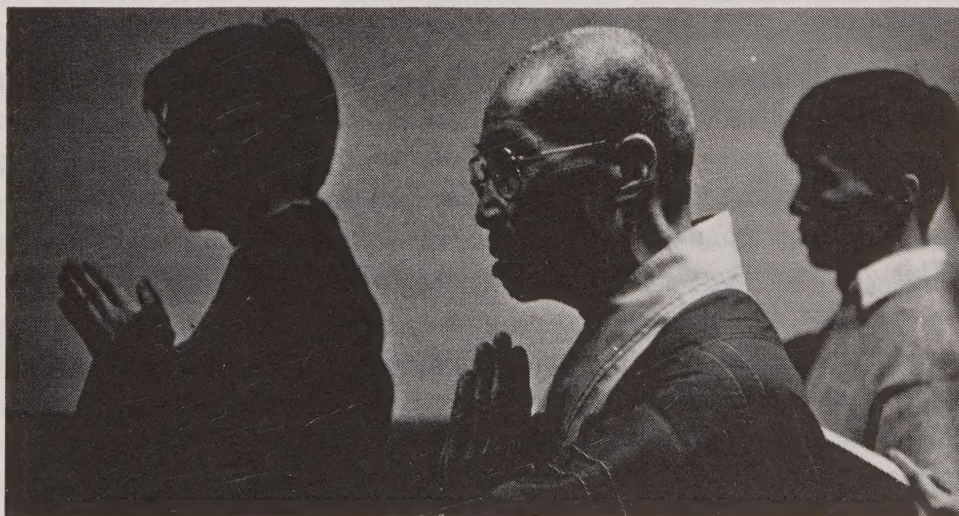
Western Pure Land, the major Buddha of the Pure Land sects, and they, too, describe upholding and reciting the sutras.

The *Brahma Net Sutra* or the *Brahmajala*, contains moral codes, and I believe it is special to China. It recommends reciting the sutras on behalf of the deceased in order to transfer merit to them.

These major Mahayana sutras encourage recitation, and it has become one of the fundamentals of Buddhist practice in China. Some of the commonly recited sutras are the *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, and the *Vimilakirti Sutra*.

I noticed that when we recited the *Heart Sutra*, most of you did not need the text. I'd like to know how many scriptures you can memorize? [Laughter.]

When I was a novice monk, my master told me to start by memorizing the *Heart Sutra*. Next, he



told me to memorize the *Sukhavati-vyha Sutra*, and after that, the *Diamond Sutra*. Finally, my master told me to memorize the *Lotus Sutra*,

which is eighty thousand words long. I never memorized the whole sutra, but I memorized most of it, and it has been of great help and benefit to me. If you want to learn to uphold a sutra as a practice, you cannot read it; you have to memorize it. You have to retain it in your mind. Only when you can retain the sutras in your memory can you practice upholding them instead of just reciting them.

It is also beneficial to memorize mantras and dharanis in addition to sutras. The word "dharani" means "complete upholding," or "universal upholding." A dharani completely encompasses the meanings and powers of whatever it is associated with, so reciting it is a powerful practice. For example, a dharani may be associated with a bodhisattva. If you uphold that dharani, your practice is an expression of the merit, virtue and attainment of that bodhisattva. In the same way, a dharani associated with a Buddha is an expression of the merit and virtue, practice and power of that Buddha.

Chinese Buddhists often memorize dharanis such as the long dharani from the *Surangama Sutra*, the *Great Compassionate Dharani* and the dharani from the *Lotus Sutra*. How many of you are memorizing dharanis?

When I was young, my master told me to memorize a dharani from the *Lotus Sutra*. He said, "This dharani is very difficult to pronounce and to memorize. If you can memorize it in a week, then in two months you can memorize the whole *Lotus Sutra*." Well, it turned that I couldn't memorize the *Lotus Sutra Dharani*, so I couldn't memorize the whole scripture.

There have been many versions of the *Record of Eminent Monks*. There are versions from the Liang, the T'ang, Sung, and the Ming dynasties. In these records, eminent monks are categorized

according to the kinds of practice they specialized in. One of the categories is reciting and upholding the scriptures.

Master Fa-tsang (643-712), the Fourth Patriarch of the Hua-yen Sect (whose teachings are based on the *Avatamsaka Sutra*) sat in meditation one night and overheard someone next door recite all eighty volumes of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Each volume of this sutra is ten thousand words long, but in a flash he heard the sutra recited from beginning to end, and understood it with utmost clarity. It is impossible to recite the *Avatamsaka Sutra* in one day. In a day, you can only recite ten volumes, so the whole sutra would take eight days. But Fa-tsang experienced the recitation in a very short period.

How many of you have recited the *Avatamsaka Sutra*?

In the Chinese traditions, practitioners who use sutra chanting as a major practice usually choose one sutra to chant. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra* are often used.

There is a story of a practitioner of long ago, who had recited the *Avatamsaka Sutra* for many years. At mealtimes, he had no need to beg for food, because deities and Dharma protectors looked after him and brought him what he needed. Would you like to try this kind of practice?

There is another story from long ago about a practitioner who recited the *Lotus Sutra* a few thousand times. When he died, a lotus flower blossomed from the mouth of his corpse.

In the Chinese tradition of formal recitation of scripture, you wash your hands and mouth and dress with decorum. There must be altar with a Buddha image. You adorn the image and make offerings to the Buddhas of flowers, food, fruit,

light and so forth. With such preparations, you can recite with utmost sincerity.

You next recite a mantra of purification of body,

done by half-standing kneeling, so that one is not sitting on the heels. In the Chinese tradition, we usually adopt the half-standing position, while in the Japanese tradition practitioners usually sit on their heels.



speech and mind, then an opening gatha, followed by the actual sutra. Afterwards, you recite the *Mantra to Make Up For Mistakes*. You may have had wandering thoughts and missed some words of the sutra. The mantra makes up for your mistakes. Convenient, isn't it? You may have ceaseless wandering thoughts while doing the recitation, and a mantra makes up for all the mistakes you made! Finally, you recite the gatha for the transferring of merits, so that the benefits of your recitation are transferred to all beings.

What of the posture in reciting sutras? It depends on the length of the scripture. You may kneel or stand for shorter sutras. In most Chinese monasteries, the morning and evening services are done standing up, and last two hours. A whole-day recitation can be done kneeling or sitting, or alternating between the two. Sitting is either cross-legged on the floor, or on a chair. Kneeling is

The Japanese have special methods of scriptural recitation. They did not translate the Chinese scriptures into Japanese. Rather, they use the original Chinese characters, so reading the scriptures is quite involved. Alone, they recite the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters. This involves the reading and understanding of the scripture. In group practice, they also read phonetically, pronouncing the characters in Japanese. Drumming on the wooden fish, the Mak-ta, accompanies this practice.

When the Japanese recite sutras in Chinese it is like reading dharanis or mantras. They do not understand the meaning; they simply recite the sounds. This is difficult and praiseworthy, for the sutras that they recite are often long. For instance, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* is eighty fascicles, the *Parinirvana Sutra* is thirty fascicles, and the great *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* is 600 fascicles. Their ardor in performing such difficult recitation is indeed praiseworthy.

However, the Japanese also have a shortcut. Reciting the whole sutra, character by character, is called "true recitation." This is quite strenuous, so the Japanese have invented another kind of reading, which is called "turning recitation." Here the title of the scripture is recited once to represent each fascicle, while the pages of the scripture are turned. For example, for each of

the 80 fascicles of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, they recite, "Homage to the *Mahavaipulya Avatamsaka Sutra*," and flip through the pages!

When I was in Japan, I visited a monastery and the monks told me that they were going to recite the *Avatamsaka Sutra* that day. I was impressed, and said, "You're going to recite the *Avatamsaka Sutra*! How are you going to finish?" They said, "No problem. We'll finish." This was before I found out how they were going to recite it. Using this method, even the 600-fascicle *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* can be recited in a short period of time. Turning recitation does not exist in China. As far as I know, it exists only in Japan.

There's a recitation and prostration practice explained in the *Lotus Sutra*. You recite the sutra character by character, and after each word you perform a prostration and recite a phrase of homage to the bodhisattvas who were in the assembly when the sutra was delivered. Some practitioners in China adapt this practice to the *Diamond* and *Avatamsaka* sutras. You must be thoroughly familiar with the scripture before you engage in this practice, so you won't prostrate without understanding the words.

Sutras usually begin with, "Thus have I heard." In Chinese this phrase is four characters, as it is four words in English. So you would start by saying, "Thus," and then you would prostrate to all the Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas associated with this scripture. For example, if you are practicing the *Lotus Sutra*, you say, "Thus," and then prostrate while chanting aloud, "Homage to the *Lotus Sutra*, Homage to the Assembly of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas present at the *Lotus Sutra* Assembly." I have done this practice myself.

Some of you may be familiar with the Nichiren Sho-shu sect in Japan, which associates itself with

the *Lotus Sutra*. They do not prostrate, but they recite the title of the *Lotus Sutra*.

When you engage in this practice, do not recite or prostrate quickly. The idea is not to finish the scripture too soon.

如  
是  
我  
聞。

"Thus have I heard"

In the Tibetan tradition, practitioners do the "four uncommon preparatory practices," one of which is one-hundred-thousand prostrations. It doesn't take quite that many prostrations for the *Lotus Sutra*. There are only eighty thousand characters! Now I'd like to talk about six benefits derived from reading the scriptures. The Dharma is never fixed. Although I only mention a few benefits, there may be innumerable others, so please tell me if you think of any.

First, by reading the scriptures we can realize mind, or "illuminate the mind." When we engage in sutra recitation, we make use of the sutra as a mirror to reflect back the reciting mind. This mind, prior to practice, is full of darkness and ignorance. We take the sutra as a mirror by which we can model our behavior, until our minds

fuse with the sutra, and we directly realize the nature of our minds.

Second, sutra recitation helps us to understand the meaning behind the sutras. Many recitations help clarify the meaning. When I was a novice, I asked my master the meaning behind the scriptures, and all he said was, "Just keep reading, and you'll understand." Now I realize that complete familiarity with the sutras will naturally elicit the meaning behind them.

I tell this to my disciples in Taiwan, but my monks and nuns refuse to understand. They ask, "Why don't you explain the sutra first? Then it will be easier to read and memorize."

Third, sutra recitation can be samadhi or one-pointed concentration practice. I teach my disciples to use their ears to listen while they follow the chanting and not think about the meaning. Use the mind to be fully aware of hearing as well as of one's own recitation.

When you are alone, of course, you listen to your own voice reciting. But in group practice it is better to listen to other people's recitation while you recite. After all, one's own voice is really of no use, because you can't enter into samadhi by

listening to it! How we enjoy listening to the sound of our own voice! This attachment prevents us from entering samadhi. That is why it is helpful to do sutra recitation in a group. You can listen to others' voices in harmony. When we recited the *Heart Sutra* before, did you listen to your own voice, or did you hear the totality of the group's voice?

A fourth benefit of sutra recitation is the spreading of the Dharma. The Sixth Patriarch of Ch'an realized enlightenment upon hearing a layman

recite a phrase from the *Diamond Sutra*: "Generating the mind without having the mind abide or dwell on anything." You, too, can help spread Dharma, simply by reciting sutras. Do not be concerned with your own enlightenment. It is not important, so long as someone else achieves enlightenment.

Reciting sutras can cause the ripening of another's virtuous karmic root. A non-Buddhist I know was traveling on a boat, feeling anxious and agitated. Next to him, a woman recited the *Heart Sutra* aloud.

Since he had nothing better to do, he listened to her. After a while his mind became settled. That piqued his interest. He thought, "If just listening to scriptural recitation can benefit me, how much more will I benefit if I do the recitation



*Prostrations at the Center*

myself!" He began to recite scriptures, and finally became a Buddhist.

The fifth benefit of scriptural recitation is the protection of Buddhadharma. The Mahayana scriptures say that whenever a person recites and upholds the sutras it is a manifestation of the Tathagata, the Buddha. Wherever there is recitation, there is the presence of the Buddha. Also, the Dharma-protectors and deities from the ten directions protect the people reciting and the area around them.

If we want to make Buddhadharma last in the world, it is not

enough that the sutras be present. We must recite and uphold the sutras. If the scriptures exist, but no one recites and makes use of them, then they are just pieces of paper. They are very good for wiping pus, as Master Lin-chi said. But when they are recited and upheld, then they become Buddhist scriptures.

Sixth, sutra recitation can be done to benefit the deceased. We can wish for their merit and virtue. Buddhists usually want sutras to be recited for deceased family members. Some time ago, I had a Western student who placed great emphasis on seated meditation and practiced all the time. It

happened that one of his close friends passed away, and he felt lost. He asked me what to do. I recommended that he recite sutras as a way of transferring merit to his deceased friend. Now, you may ask, "Is sitting meditation helpful for others?" It is helpful, but it is not as direct as sutra recitation.

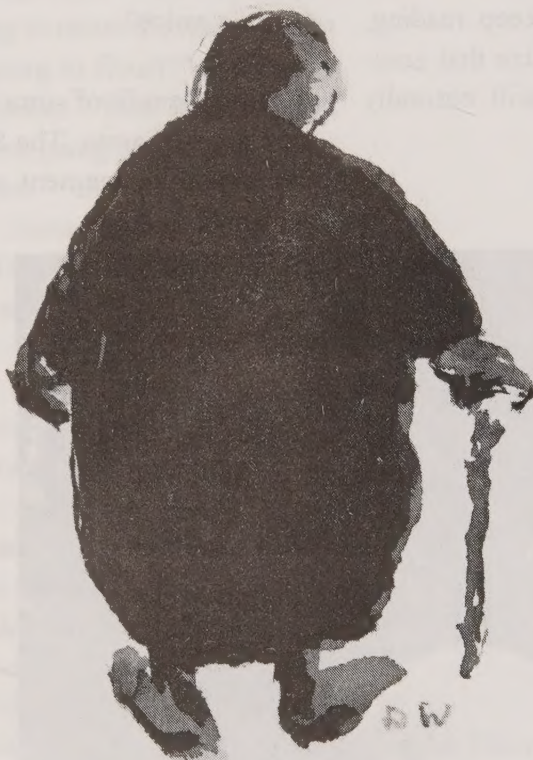
When a sutra is recited, the power of Buddhadharma calls back the deceased so that he or she can benefit from listening to the Buddhadharma. If the deceased cannot come back, numerous sentient beings always gather when sutras are recited, and it is they who benefit from listening to Buddhadharma. Because they benefit, the one who passed away also benefits.

The *Brahmajala Sutra* says that bodhisattvas should explain the Mahayana sutras and Vinaya for the sake of sentient beings whenever someone is seriously ill, and on the day

when a family member, Spiritual Advisor or Dharma Master passes away. At the time of passing, and for three to seven weeks afterward, the practitioner should have a master expound the sutras, and should himself recite sutras and make offerings, in order to benefit the deceased.

Finally, we recite the sutras hoping to directly benefit sentient beings, both formless and with form, so that they generate Bodhi mind, the altruistic mind of enlightenment, and attain Buddhahood.

**Question:** Shih-fu spoke earlier of going from



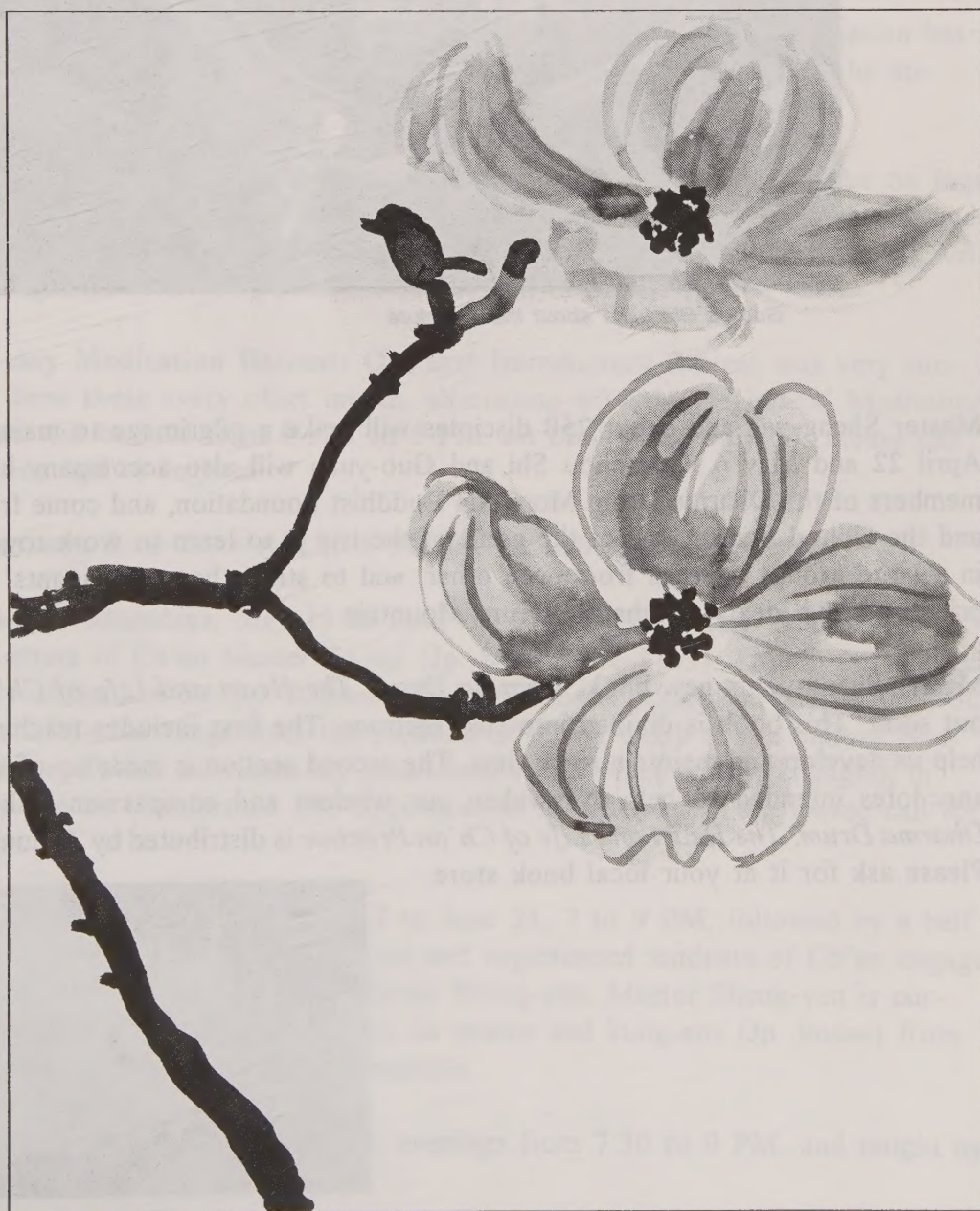
Dorothy Weiner

distracted mind to one-mind, to no-mind. Is it possible to attain no-mind through recitation or upholding of sutras?

**Shih-fu:** Entering samadhi and illuminating the mind are among the benefits of scripture recitation. Now, there is depth in this. If you enter worldly samadhi, then, of course, that is not no-mind. But if you enter samadhi in the true Mahayana sense, where you drop all self-centeredness, that is inseparable from wisdom, or prajna.

As I said earlier, the sutras are particularly for the mind. Their function is the cultivation of samadhi and wisdom. That is why my Master told me to simply read and recite sutras, and said that eventually I would gain wisdom, even without any explanation of the sutras.

Thank all of you for having the patience to listen to what I have said. I have done all this talking because human beings need sutra recitation, and, for that matter, other sentient beings need it too.



Nora Ling-yun Shih

## News from the Center:

On April 14 over sixty people from the Center picnicked at the Kendall Sculpture Garden in Purchase, NY. Guo Yuan Shi gave a short talk, and there was walking meditation in the morning, followed by lunch. In the afternoon Guo-gu Shi gave a tour of the sculpture. Everyone enjoyed the early spring countryside.



Guo-gu Shi talks about the sculpture

GYSh

Master Sheng-yen and about 250 disciples will make a pilgrimage to mainland China between April 22 and May 6. Guo-chou Shi and Guo-yuan will also accompany him. Participants are members of the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Foundation, and come from Canada, Taiwan and the United States. One of the goals of the trip is to learn to work together and cooperate in a large group, to learn from each other, and to strengthen participants' commitment to the principles and ideals of Dharma Drum Mountain.

Master Sheng-yen's new book, *Dharma Drum, The Heart and Life of Ch'an Practice* will be out soon. This book is divided into two sections. The first includes teachings about Ch'an, to help us develop and maintain right view. The second section is made up of short statements and anecdotes intended to help us awaken our wisdom and compassion. Like our other books, *Dharma Drum, The Heart and Life of Ch'an Practice* is distributed by Atrium Publishers' Group. Please ask for it at your local book store.



GYSh

## Upcoming Events:

**Dharma Gathering for English-Speaking People:** Friday, May 10, 6:30 to 10 PM. Master Sheng-yen will speak on his recent pilgrimage to mainland China. R.S.V.P.

**Special Public Lecture:** May 12 at 1:30 PM, as part of the regular Sunday program. Master Sheng-yen will speak on, "Prajna - Mother of the Buddhas."

**Vesak, Buddha's Birthday Celebration:** May 19, 10 AM to 4 PM. A day of special events to celebrate Buddha's birth, including special events for children.

**Please note that we have changed some of our regular programs and added new ones:**

**Group Meditation:** Tuesday evenings from 7:30 to 9 PM. Thursday group meditation has been canceled, and instead we will offer tso-ch'an (sitting meditation) instruction by appointment, in the months when there is no Beginners' Meditation Workshop.

**Beginners' Meditation Workshops:** now held every other month. The next will be on June 8, from 9 AM to 1 PM in English, and from 2 to 6 PM in Chinese. Methods of sitting and walking meditation, breathing, sleeping, yoga exercises and massage will be covered, as well as the theory and stages of meditation practice. Please call to register.

**Introductory One-day Meditation Retreat:** Our first Introductory Retreat was very successful, so we will have these every other month, alternating with the Beginners' Meditation Workshops. Retreats will be held from 9 AM to 5 PM. on May 4 and July 20. Please call for further information and to register.

**One-day Ch'an Retreat:** June 22, 9 AM to 8 PM. Please call to register.

**Special Ch'an Class:** Wednesdays, May 15 to June 26, 7 to 9 PM. Master Sheng-yen comments on the Letters of Ch'an Master Ta-hui (Jp. Daie, 1088-1163). Ta-hui was one of the greatest revivers of the Lin-chi (Jp. Rinzai) Ch'an tradition, through the use of hua-t'ou practice. The letters of Ta-hui range from the problem of facing death to the unborn Buddha Mind. In particular, Ta-hui addresses lay practitioners and explains how engaging in worldly occupations can be transformed into opportunities to practice Ch'an. Please call for further information.

**The Friday Night Gathering:** Fridays, May 17 to June 21, 7 to 9 PM, followed by a half hour of socializing. In this course, both beginners and experienced students of Ch'an engage in group practice and receive guidance from Master Sheng-yen. Master Sheng-yen is currently giving Ti-chang (Dharma talks, Jp. teisho) on poems and kung-ans (Jp. koans) from the Ch'an tradition. Please call for further information.

**Tai-chi Chuan class:** Beginning in July, Thurs. evenings from 7:30 to 9 PM, and taught by David Ngo.

## Ongoing Activities, except during retreats:

**Recitation Group:** Mon. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M. Amitabha Buddha recitation in Chinese, and prostrations.

**Group Meditation:** Tues. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M.

**Ch'an Sitting Group:** Fri. 7:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M., with a social half hour until 9:30. An evening of sitting and walking meditation, with a short talk on the application of Ch'an to daily life or the concepts and methods of Ch'an. This is also an opportunity to ask Master Sheng-yen or one of the resident monks for guidance in practice. Please call for details.

**Sunday Program:** Meditation, chanting, vegetarian lunch, afternoon talk and afternoon meditation. 10:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.

**First Saturday of each month:** One day Ch'an retreat, 9:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Please call for details and to register.

**Last Saturday of every other month:** Beginners' Meditation Workshop. In English: 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. In Chinese 2:00 to 6:00. Please call for details and to register.

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